

# Choreographed Space

A Thesis Exhibition Statement

Submitted to the College of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Fine Arts, Department of Art and Art History

University of Saskatchewan

by

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I have a loving family and a fabulous network of friends who have walked along side me during this MFA journey. I always felt loved and supported. I am humbled and sincerely grateful to them.

## Dedication

Dedicated to my children Arya Gabriele Alaie and Julian Hagblom Alaie. My sons are an unending supply of love and encouragement. They inspire me to always strive to be the best I can be.

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## GENESIS

I think of myself as a person who rallies for social justice, a woman who stands up for minorities, the disadvantaged and the downtrodden. One who will be a helpful voice and not an accessory to harmful outcomes. I would like to think that I possess the qualities that qualify me to be a positive contributor in this world. However, I am no Judy Chicago! In a 2018 *New York Times* article Chicago was referred to as a “god mother of feminist art.” She holds a solid place in art history as a feminist icon. Her renowned work, “The Dinner Party” took over 400 volunteers and five years to assemble. The work is a tribute to rededicating the history of Western civilization to the women who are often left out of it (Weiss, 2018). Chicago continues to actively raise awareness to the practice of erasing women in history.

Nor am I a Banksy! He is one of those artists who chose a progressive and alternative pathway. He veered away from the traditional process to become part of a stable of artists. He avoided submitting a portfolio to the museums and galleries to be considered as one of several artists in the gallery’s stable (Ellsworth-Jones, 2013). Banksy started out as a graffiti artist. He used the spray can to bomb walls and various surfaces in place of the conventional canvas and he earned his status by word of mouth. The *Smithsonian Magazine* referred to him as, “subversive and secretive” and credited him as one of the top 100 world influencers. The artist claims, “All you need are a few ideas and a broadband connection.” He is being modest.

In one of Banksy’s recent projects, he contemporized pieces that posed as sublime landscapes, with the disturbing addition of empty life jackets and buoys strewn across the shoreline. He intended to highlight the plight of refugees who risk their lives in attempts to cross the Mediterranean Sea in order to escape conflict. Three of his paintings raised

\$29 million dollars for a Palestinian children's hospital. The migrant crisis is one of many issues who Banksy, with his artistic masterfulness, manages to drive the public's attention towards.

I include mention of these artists because I am affected by their courage. Who cannot be inspired by these acts of artistry, dedication and fearlessness? I will continue to admire and follow artists who engage in political activism and track those who seek to use their voice to hammer issues of social justice, animal rights, and environmental protection and beyond. I remain inspired by their tenacity and their bravery.

Although I aspire to infuse my art with blatant or even subtle political commentary, for this exhibition I have centred my direction towards a theme that conjoins my enthusiasm for the grid, geometric patterns and other familiar shapes. My intention was to create art in contrast to the chaotic sequence of challenging world events that are in our midst. Work that will communicate quiet, grace and solace – offering viewers a visual pause away from the worry and strife that permeates these times.

The diversity of my experiences and passions culminated in this exhibition. The confluence of: my Swedish and Scottish heritage, my art, graphic design and urban planning education, my intimate association with Iranian art and culture, my exposure to Indigenous cultures (Māori, Sami, Inuit, First Nations and Métis), and my academic studies of ancient tattooing and digital literature – all of these components coalesced with my Canadian prairie upbringing to present colourful and whispering works.

I often find myself transfixed with patterns, colours and motifs. It is possible that if you look for them, they will be noticed. I was introduced to the work of Jessie Oonark, a deceased Inuit artist from Baker Lake, Nunavut. I worked in sales at the Northern Images



store in Churchill, Manitoba. This experience was equivalent to diving into the deep end of Inuit art and culture. It was a sensory overload – impactful and provocative. It was the characteristic of repetitiveness and the unconventional use of colours in Oonark's prints that captivated my attention. The work that I was particularly drawn to featured traditional symbols and was illustrated with opaque swaths of colour. The story-telling narrative, the unpretentious composition and the non-adornment enchant me. Her contribution and leadership is comparable to Banksy and Chicago, and she is unequivocally inspirational.



1. Jessie Oonark, *Singing Northern Lights*, 1985 (private collection)



2. Rita Aviliajuk Oosuaq, wool duffel, embroidery thread. Year unknown.

In the spring of 1981, I left Sweden and returned to Saskatchewan with my Iranian husband. I had gathered a collection of vintage porcelain plates and had kept them in storage. I naively proclaimed that they were ‘old’ when I took them out to show my husband. He commented, “Do you realize where I am from? We have art that dates back thousands of years.” I was in my early 20s and I was a typical Canadian. My cultural intelligence was limited. My saving grace was that I was keen to learn and understand, and this has been a personal characteristic that I value.

Mina Forsyth was one of my earlier art professors. Students were invited to her surprisingly all white and minimally decorated house. Her walls and tables were absent of art. Her countertops were empty. She commented that she avoided the influence and distraction of stuff in her midst. This is my kindred aesthetic. However, my home environment is not at all uninhabited. Iranian, Swedish and Inuit art and craft is dispersed



throughout my space and there is an inevitable absorption of cultural influence that I carry forward into my art.



3. Various examples of Iranian art held in my personal collection.

For my MFA application in 2018, I included paintings that referenced the surrounding landscape and the geography of the prairies. In 2014 I worked as a municipal planner for the regional district of Waterwolf. This work required me to visit regions in rural Saskatchewan. I was surrounded every day by the quintessential and transcending beauty of the prairies. The submitted body of work was inspired by this prairie landscape – a minimalist and simplified interpretation which often included a horizon line or an object that referenced three dimensions on a two dimensional surface.



4. Gale Hagblom, *Pumpkin Sky*, 2013, Oil on canvas.



5. Gale Hagblom, *The Road*, 2012. Oil on canvas.

The style of work in this graduate series falls within the abstract expressionist and colour field painter's genre. It emphasizes bands of colours that highlight the interplay between

two or three colours. The paintings are a statement of colour, pattern, light and space. The likes of Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, Agnes Martin, Peter Tollens, and Mary Corse, represented the style of art that pushed abstraction to new directions and until you see them up close, you cannot realize the great impact they have on the space they occupy.

In 1989 the National Gallery of Canada acquired a painting by Barnett Newman titled, “Voice of Fire.” Newman was an American painter known for his intellectual prowess (Kedmey, 2017). The public was outraged at the nearly two million-dollar price tag and some claimed that, “this is not art” and other citizens compared the work to something their five year old could make (Simpson, 2014). Its scale is massive and although it was simplistic and elemental in design, it is most powerful. It turned out to be true to its title because it created a stir and caused divisiveness and rigorous discourse that went beyond the boundaries of the artistic community. Newman said that he intended the work to transform the space while testing our sensory experience – and it did.



6. Barnett Newman, *Voice of Fire*, 1967. Acrylic on canvas.



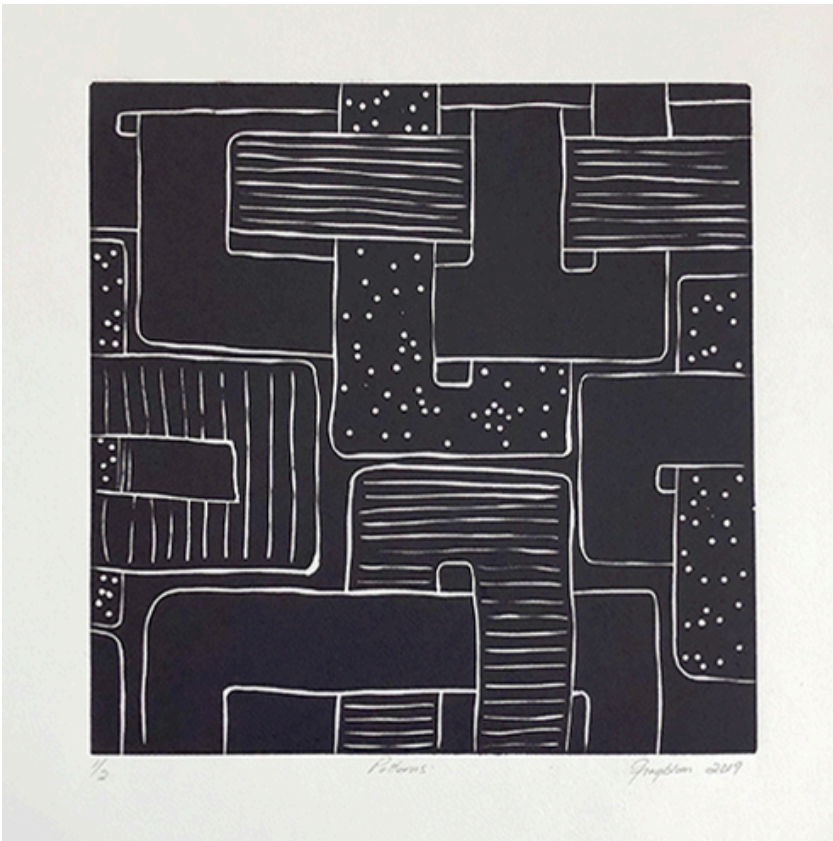


7. Mark Rothko, *White Centre*, 1950. Oil on canvas.

*Silence is so accurate.*  
—Mark Rothko

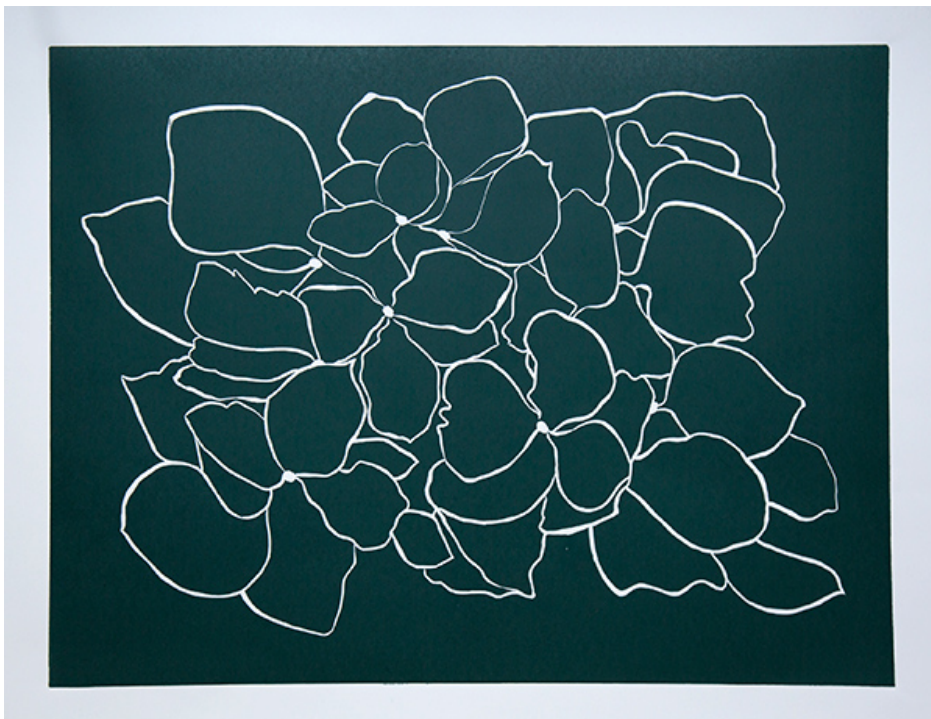
## Printmaking: A Beneficial Segue

There is something about printmaking that conjures up specific qualities in a person. The intrigue with process and deliberateness and the act of being precise, are the characteristics that can be immensely beneficial to this artistic process. I count myself as one who possesses these qualities. The attraction to ordinal systems, step two following step one, and the corresponding structures involved with printmaking provide a level of comfort in anticipation. In spite of this knowledge-based process that is grounded in tradition, and that can be rehearsed over and over again, there can always be room for error (Hill, 2016). Embracing the unexpected, the wabi-sabi aesthetic, can offer a valuable segue towards a beautiful and spontaneous outcome. This aspect of printmaking is fundamentally gratifying.



8. Gale Hagblom, *Patterns*, 2018, Linocut

“Patterns” represents work that corresponds with the arrangement of roads. Over half of the world’s human population lives in urban centres. We are accustomed to navigating this interstitial and dynamic space that supports all human activity. The ancient urban planners choreographed the first cities with the road developed as a network and pattern within distinctive geographic constraints. This relief print references this grid pattern, the geometry of squares and rectangles and the perception of visual balance and neutrality of the line widths (Jacobs, 1961). It was one of the earlier relief prints that I completed before continuing on to four-colour screen-printing.



9. Gale Hagblom, *Hydrangea (green)*, 2019. Ink on paper.

Screen-printing proved to be a greater challenge. I prefer to work in a larger format and this posed a problem because of the limits with my height and strength. Fortunately the department’s skillful technician was a most valuable resource. My background in graphic



design aided me with understanding the CMYK colour application. However, beyond that insight, I continued to struggle with my physical limitations.

During the first year I took an unplanned hiatus from painting in order to concentrate on printmaking and course work. The result was somewhat liberating. The tendencies to include objects in my paintings that produced perspective and depth, and often included horizon lines, were omitted. My prints were illustrative and laden with patterns but most importantly they were flat. I was introduced to Monoprinting and shown that I could apply ink directly onto the screen to produce a one-of-a-kind print. This process was more familiar and corresponded with the techniques common in painting.



10. Gale Hagblom, *Pretty in Pink*, 2019. Monoprint, Ink on paper.



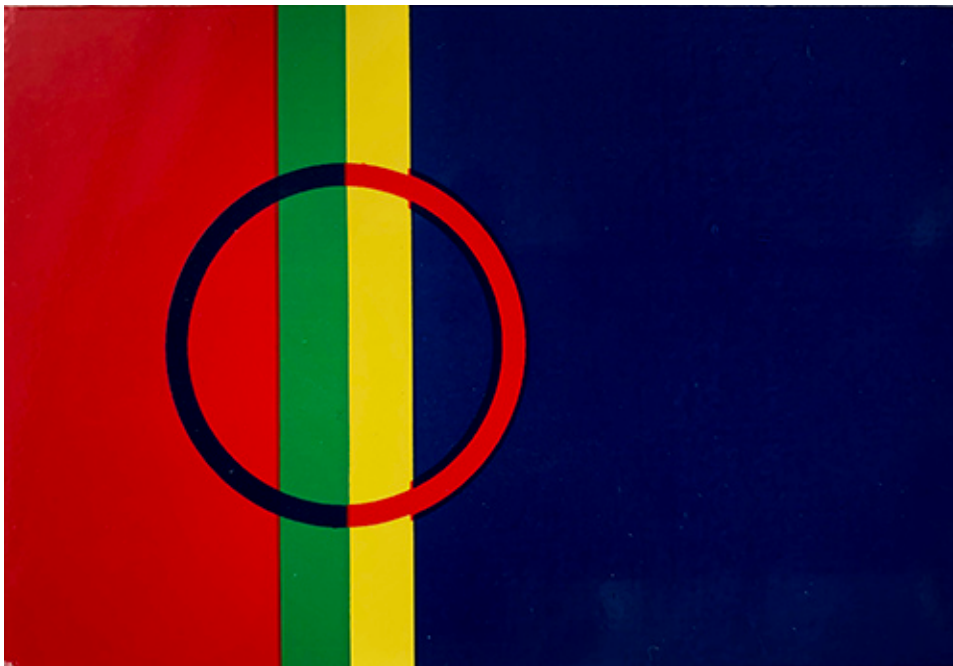
11. Gale Hagblom, *Strata*, 2019. Monoprint, Ink on paper.

These pieces are painterly and abstracted and were produced in tandem with the relief prints that are more illustrative, with linear lines that define the forms and objects with a hard edge. The art critic, Greenberg has described this style as, “Post-painterly Abstraction.” The emergence of this painting style also corresponds to the illustrative style of my graphic design projects. There is an affiliation; an intrinsic or inherent value to the flatness, the shallow surface and the circumscribed aesthetic of relief printing that appears in this series of paintings.

The colourful geometric floor patterns installed in the lobby of a historic Mexican hotel inspired the first painting in this collection. The floor tiles were high contrasting colours of black, beige and pink. I interpreted the pattern with two colours, white and a subdued warmer white. “Patterns of Mérida” became the entrant and the impetus to create more work in this style.

## Researching Sami Art + Culture

In 2019 I received a Mitacs grant to research, “Indigenous Art and Culture in Public Space.” I chose to focus on the art and culture of Sami, the Indigenous people of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. I spent May and June at Umeå Universitet in Sweden. During those two months I interviewed several Sami artists and cultural leaders. Amongst several highlights was the opportunity to attend the Arctic Arts Summit in Rovaniemi, Finland. For three days I was surrounded by 450 Indigenous artists and arts community advocates. There was a common theme and identity – a sharing of space defined by ideas, feelings and history. The summit focused on ecology, sustainability and the urgency attributed to the climate crisis. The anxiety that surrounded the participants was palatable because they believed it could potentially destroy their way of life. The summit was a remarkable experience and my association with a few Sami artists will continue to inform my art.



12. Sami Flag.

Is painting still relevant?

"I used to paint," was a statement I heard from faculty and guest artists. In reflecting on her art practice, Karin Mamma Andersson said, "I like paintings... I like to paint." I could definitely relate with her comment and also found it somewhat liberating. When I began the MFA program in 2018, I arrived as a painter with an affliction of doubt. I had adopted an attitude of uncertainty about whether painting still mattered. This sentiment was reinforced within a couple of weeks into the program. I continued to struggle with the idea of painting. I searched for painters who were esteemed, principled and who produced works of art that I wished I had painted.

When I learned that I would be in Europe last spring, I began exploring the Internet for artists who painted. Mamma Andersson's name kept surfacing as one of Sweden's most celebrated painters. She is a contemporary artist, based in Stockholm, and we share a similar vintage. She refers to her studio as the artist's workspace and the main tool that contains her arsenal of supplies (Lund, 2017). She collects numerous types of books and cuts out pictures in search of new material and inspiration (Lund, 2017). This method of collecting images is similar to the 'swipe-file' that a writer or graphic designer often builds. It is a collection of reference material that helps with the creative process. Andersson refers to this as her "picture bank" and talks about how she depends on this resource material for motivation and inspiration (Lund, 2017). She recognizes that part of her creative process is that she is constantly needing to fill in a void that she experiences when she no longer has her paintings in her midst (Lund, 2017).

Andersson is self-aware and is driven by motivation to improve on the previous series of paintings (Lund, 2017). She is frank about what she needs to do in order to find new ideas that will ignite her imagination so that she can move on to the next body of work.

Andersson is credited with boosting and renewing interest in painting as a viable contemporary medium (Moderna Museet i Stockholm). Painting's status has faced challenges over the past 150 years as new mediums and multidisciplinary art practices evolved (Farago). Two historic developments shook painting to its foundations: the invention of photography in the 1830s and in the early 1900s, Marcel Duchamp's ready-made object which privileged ideas over visuals, and recalibrated the terms of artistic success (Farago).

Is painting merely a gateway medium? The declaration that painting was dead, is no longer important, or is in some way a dated medium, or does it continue to influence and resonate with artists who paint. The idea that painting may no longer be a relevant genre can invoke a sense of vulnerability – a notorious and influential experience of quarantined isolationism. This notion has caused me to anguish over believing that painting may be redundant, in spite of my conviction as an artist. Some painters have searched beyond this medium and even abandoned it altogether or for a period (Tate, Tuymans). Yet, currently it appears to be thriving.

Luc Tuymans is a Belgium artist who has received international acclaim for his paintings. He is considered a key figure of a new generation of figurative painters who have “continued to paint during a time when many believed the medium had lost its relevance” (Tate, Tuymans). Tuymans, who the press has anointed a “saviour of painting,” refers to the toolbox in a manner similar to Andersson (Ruiz, 2019). Although they differ in the value they place on photography and how it helps both of them to conceptualize their work (Tate, Tuymans). Tuymans uses elements of media images (photography, film and television) as resources for his paintings (Tate, Tuymans). He

works to transform and recreate this data imagery into paintings. He emphasizes the quality of physicality in the medium and his own authorship, the handcrafted element, as a central component of the paintings he creates (Tate, Tuymans). Tuymans' subject material and approach is of interest to me. He paints in a variety of styles and content and also references, borrows or appropriates, mass produced wallpaper patterns, Christmas decorations, and everyday objects, referred to as inconsequential and banal (Tate, Tuymans). From there he launches them into compelling works of art.

Beyond the borrowing of media images he uses to inspire his subject material, are a collection of Tuymans' most impactful paintings. These are drawn from the horror of the Holocaust; the atrocities of the Belgium Congo or other highly charged political subject material (Ruiz, 2019). The aestheticism, the cognitive association, and the consequences from these historical episodes, is one that underpins his art practice (Ruiz, 2019).

Tuymans' said that violence is the only structure that underlines his work and this ability he has to unearth the violence that lurks beneath the surface of apparently banal images (McKinney). In this regard, Tuymans' paintings are quietly provocative and they emit a subliminal reference to the human condition.

Locating artists that are credited with reinvigorating painting has unearthed a spirit of camaraderie and a validation in the currency that painting currently occupies. It reaffirms and also has convinced me that I need to stick to what I am interested in. However, there is a second dilemma that holds a far greater significance; the struggle with creating more stuff that may not be of any measurable importance towards effecting change in the current crisis with climate change. It is not only the medium but the content that I find motivational. In this media-dependent environment, unless an individual is secluded and

avoiding all contact and exposure, climate change is the issue that is most prevailing and somehow the crisis seems to seep into every aspect of our lives.

The media is abundant with climate change content and artists are working in tandem with environmental groups to help with the daunting task of generating debates and raising awareness about pressing issues. The leading international scientific body that is charged with assessing the science related to climate change is the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a United Nations agency. Artists are accepting the challenge and committing to join the troupes and contribute in some meaningful way in the battle of disseminating well-researched information regarding this wide-scale emergency. I admire this commitment but it was not the time for me to adopt this theme.

## Above the Line

Beyond the effort to produce meaningful art that calls attention to human issues, is the aspiration to successfully innovate and create art that ascends to an exalted platform.

Art that will transcend further than the temporal limitations of one's lifetime.

Saskatchewan-born, American abstract artist Agnes Bernice Martin, is a painter that represents this quality of achievement. She was introduced to me by Kaija Sanelma Harris, a Finish born textile artist who I met in 2000. I was dismissive the first few times Harris mentioned Martin's name. She frequently talked about the importance of Martin's art and how she was one of only a few artists that exhibited the qualities that affected her at her core. I have sense grown to appreciate Martin's art and see her as a great artist.

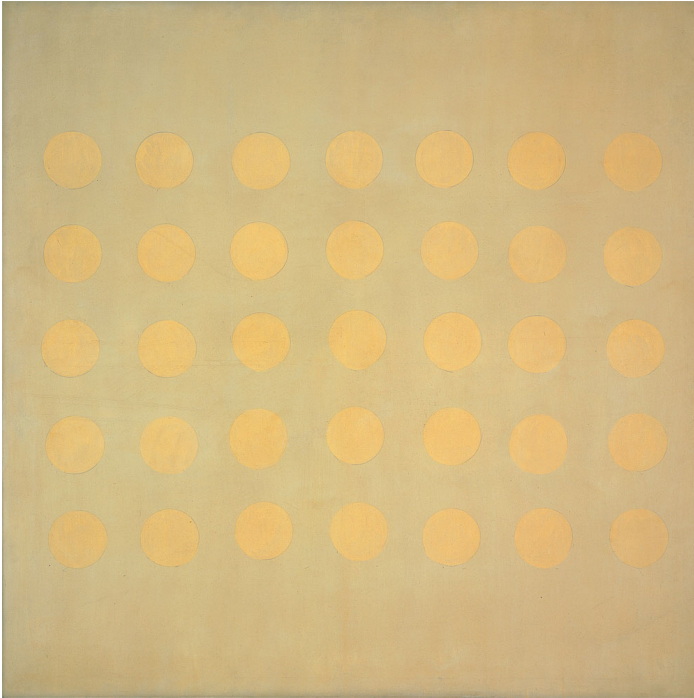


13. Agnes Martin, *Happy Holiday*, 1999

Martin is frequently described as an abstract and/or minimalist colour field painter who is legendary, enigmatic, fiercely independent, solitary, and an artist mystic and desert seer (Everett-Green; Princenthal; Richmond et al; Laing, Gotthardt). Although



she had her demons, she was principled and disciplined. She remained firm to her origins – working hard with simple tools, keeping your own counsel and getting the job done (Princenthal 16).



14. Agnes Martin, *Buds*, 1960.

The prairie landscape represents the first horizons Martin had known with bands of colour she saw in her environment (Everett-Green). Wallace Stegner shared similar geographical origins as Martin, describing the Canadian prairie as primarily flat, empty and nearly abstract (Stegner). The visual rhythms of the land, the wide-open expanses, and the geometric patterns on the stubble fields at harvest time remain unchanged since Martin’s early childhood. She has said that, “it was so flat you could see the curvature of the earth.” This was her foundational experience and what she saw – an uncluttered prairie environment with a modest aesthetic that featured the richness of the eloquent patterns and colours of the land. She referred to the subtle emotions of happiness that we feel without cause in this world and the kind of perfection we might

find in a summer morning or an experience listening to a passage from Beethoven and how she aspired to capture this perfection in her paintings and initiate happiness in the viewer (Richmond 26, Tome).

Martin's paintings inspire a semblance of still and heightened awareness – potentially igniting an existential and meditative reaction (Rinder 10). Bruce Russell co-curator of an exhibition held at the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan on January 26 to April 28, 2019, commented that when he was reaching out to people who owned Martin's paintings for the purpose of borrowing to exhibit them, the response he most often heard was that people did not want to be apart from the paintings. This is a level of achievement most artists would celebrate, aspire to and be complimented by.

Martin did not achieve a level of critical acknowledgement without challenge. There were ebbs and flows that came about from suffering from a debilitating mental disorder, from being a lesbian at a time when it was viewed as morally abhorrent, and, in her words, from being born to a mother who did not want children, leaving Martin to believe that she was hated as a child (Laing). In spite of these intense obstacles, she found a way to forge her own path (Gotthardt). She was determined, stubborn and persistent in her conviction to be unconcerned with her inner self (Princenthal).

Although I do not see any possibility or benefits in moving away from family and friends, I appreciate the sentiment. In a remote New Mexico countryside, Martin found her passion and demonstrated her prowess. The celebrated austere paintings that featured pale stripes and grids bordered by hand-drawn pencil lines that are full of emotional and meditative qualities, were inspired by her hermetic life, the prairie and desert landscape

and the Taoist ideals of balance and harmony (Laing; Richmond et al; Princenthal; Moszynska; Gotthardt).

Martin was always committed to conveying an emotional state – to exploring the joyous, measured simplicities of the rigorously abstract yet expression-imbued work (Simon). She explained that her best work came from a well of personal happiness and the concept that beauty illustrates happiness (Princenthal 261). It was through observation of the world's natural beauty that she was able to paint (Gotthardt). Martin was a devoted student of Zen and Christian mysticism and also a sworn skeptic (Princenthal 257). She resisted anything that distracted from focus a on the visual experience her art offered... joy, love or innocence and the resulting extraordinary sparseness and reticence in her art (Gotthardt; Princenthal 257).

*I believe in living above the line. Above the line is happiness and love, you know.  
Below the line is all sadness and destruction and unhappiness. And I don't go down  
below the line for anything.*

–Agnes Martin

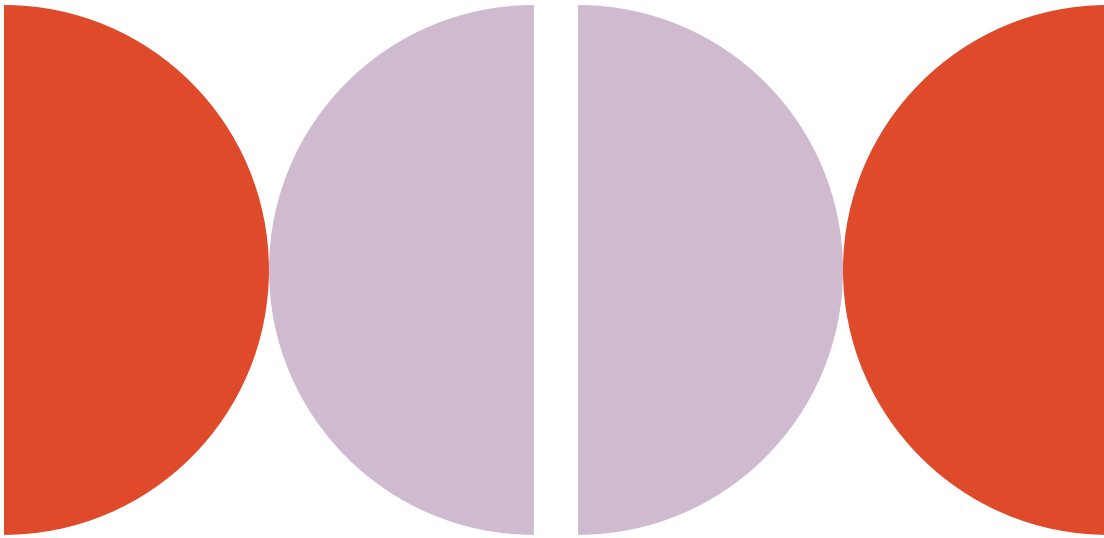
In addition to myself, Martin continues to inspire and grow new appreciators (Gotthardt; Princenthal 257). Her international recognition extends to remote regions of the world. I found a copy of a book titled, “Agnes Martin: Her Life and Art” written by Nancy Princenthal. This was one publication amongst barely 20 books available for sale at the museum located on the grounds of the Umeå University's Academy of Fine Arts. It is outstanding and heartwarming that Martin would be held in such high esteem and celebrated as a beloved and influential artist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gotthardt).

The beautiful art she created during her lifetime is a gift. It is an elusive quality that separates the mediocre from good or even great art. The artist acquires a tenure as a consequence of recognition – rises to the top and becomes distinguishable from the rest. There is no conclusive formula that will guarantee the artist to achieve this public or commercial exaltation and recognition.



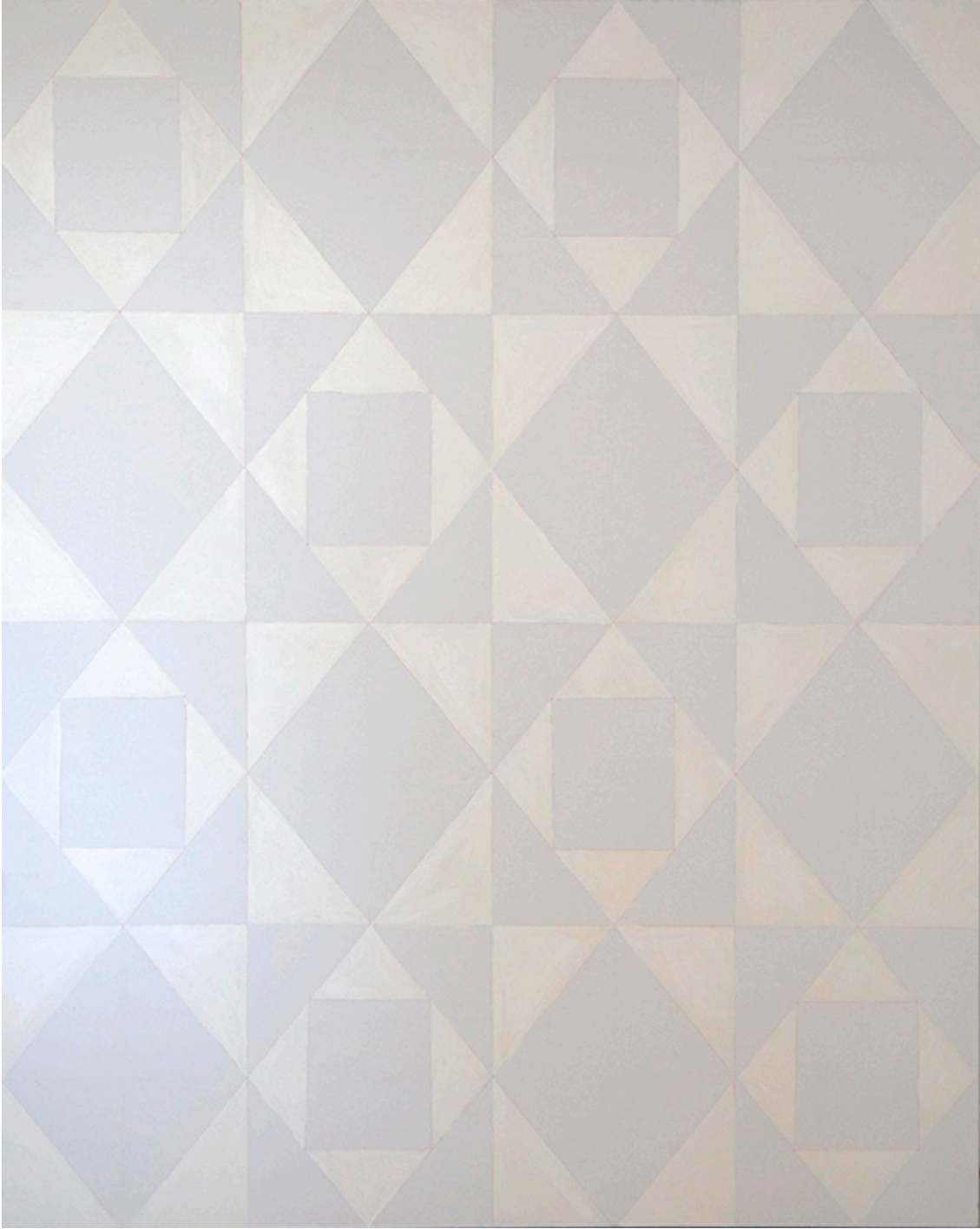
15. Gale Hagblom, *Boundaries*, 2020. Oil on canvas

This painting is coloured in a dark background with translucent layers of squares that quietly merge from the opaque indigo blue, but do not extend to the edges of the canvas. It is composed similar to a framed picture or poster format with a larger area on the bottom of the canvas.



16. Two installation works were completed on site. Two of the movable walls were painted with half circles positioned side by side and the third represented a weave-like grid in contrasting colours with a subtle pink underpainting. The simple and large shapes were choreographed in a way to affect the space in an uncomplicated and serene manner.





17. Gale Hagblom, *Patterns of Mérida*, 2020. Oil on canvas.

*Patterns of Mérida* resulted in a quieter version to the existing battery of contrasting bold colours and hard-edged patterns observed on the tiled floor in a historic hotel in Mexico. As a result, the painting is calm and purposeful.





18. Gale Hagblom, *Undercurrents*, 2020. Oil on canvas.

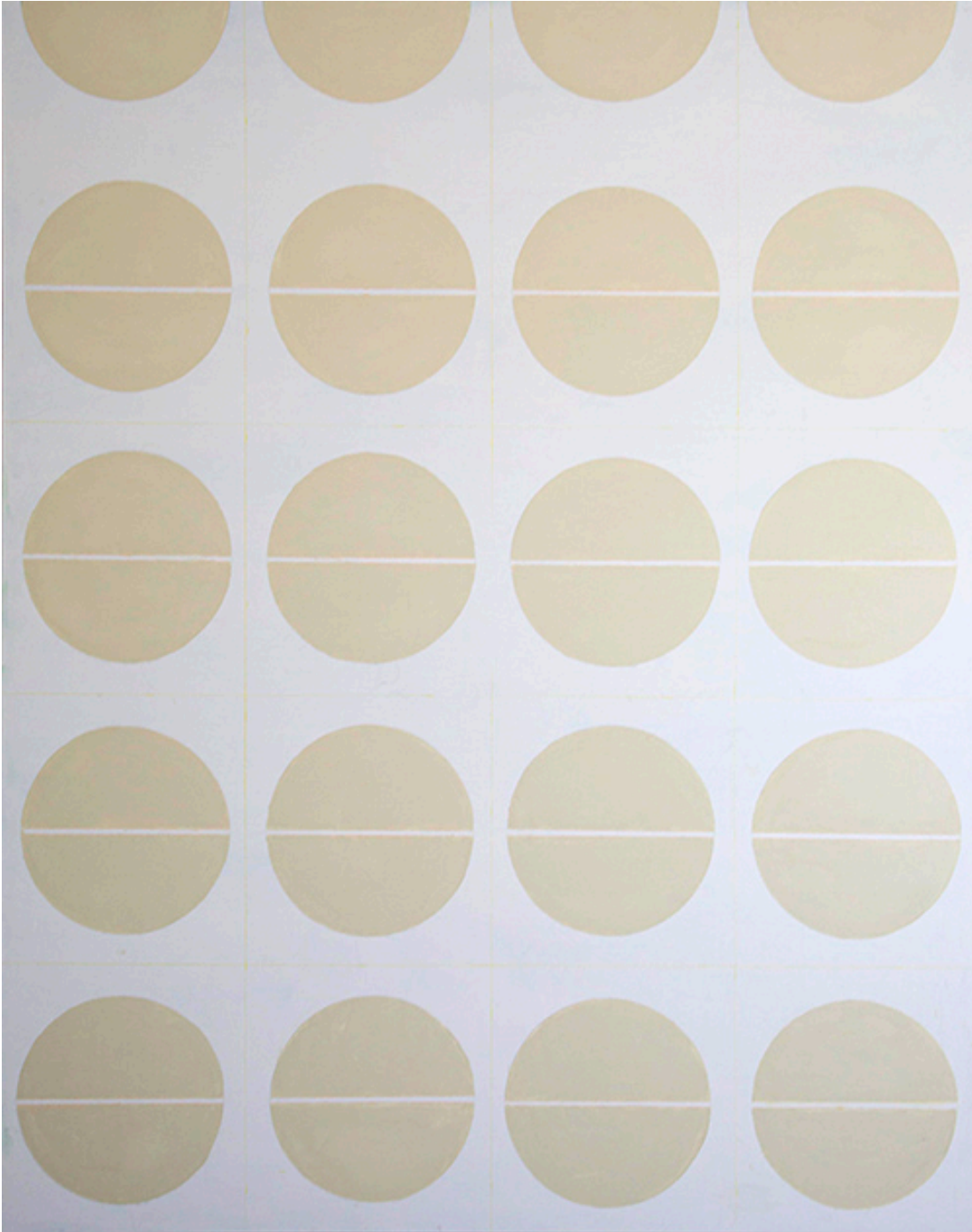
This portrait of a grid is painted in formidable and complimentary colours with subtle appearances of underlining currents that are generated by the earth's air in motion.



19. Gale Hagblom, *Sections*, 2020. Oil on canvas.

*Sections*’ speaks to the aerial patterns of the grain farms typical of the prairies and the resemblance to the grid system. The colours depict the vibrant grain fields that surround our prairie cities.





20. Gale Hagblom, *Divisions*, 2020. Oil on canvas.

For *Divisions* I employ the circle as a symbol of unity and completeness. However, I have bisected the circle into halves to demonstrate the divisiveness and polarization that make up equal parts of the sphere – a symbol of the political compass.



21. Gale Hagblom, *untitled*, 2020. Oil on canvas.

The columns run vertical and never intersect. The wider panels of faded indigo blue are contrasted with narrow strips of pale turquoise. The space is activated with several half circles that illuminate the surface.



22. Gale Hagblom, *Bisectional*, 2020. Oil on canvas.

The circular shapes in *Bisectional* are deliberate and situated asymmetrically with the size altered within the pattern of repeated shapes. Some of the shapes fall off of the canvas to provoke the viewer to look twice and cause them to pause for a time.





23. Gale Hagblom, *Circles*, 2020. Acrylic on canvas.

In Barbara Walker's book, *The Woman's Dictionary of Symbols & Sacred Objects*, she writes that, "the circle is one of the primary feminine signs... a consecrated space, a ceremonial space where all participants are equal. The unbroken circle is nowhere and everywhere. The circle symbol represents the element of fire and the horizontal line stands for water." The circle form often appears in my ceramic, glass, graphic design, wood and metalwork.



24. Gale Hagblom, *Exhibition at Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, U of S.* 2020.





25. Gale Hagblom, *Exhibition at Gordon Snelgrove Gallery, U of S.* 2020.

## Conclusion

There is so much to glean from the artists I have mentioned and the prairie grid has also been such an irresistible influence in my art. This exhibition has elements interwoven from urban planning theories, graphic design, and fine art and craft practices with acknowledgement of the hegemony of my western, white privilege. Jane Jacobs, the esteemed American urban planner wrote that, “We need art... to reassure us of our own humanity.”

In this exhibition I have conversed with painters that have been identified as Abstract Expressionist, colour field, and/or minimalist painters and post-painterly abstractionists – Martin, Rothko, Newman, Falkenstein, Bing and Brown are but a few of the them. The work is united by geometry, repetition, the variations of subtle and bold colours, the variable surface treatments, and a polite affinity with subversiveness and dissension. The subject of these paintings is elemental and these immaterial forms are non-objective in an attempt to infuse the canvas with an atmosphere of open space. In addition, the paintings are uncomplicated. They are quiet and restrained compositions that whisper irreverence and they allude to an anti-decorative aesthetic.

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